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ABSTRACT

A study examining the classroom English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learning experience of six language-minority children from kindergarten through fourth grade is reported in a case study of one child, a native speaker of Punjabi, in her kindergarten class. Data were gathered, using ethnographic methods, in classroom observation, some videotaped or audiotaped, and parent and teacher interviews. The child's language abilities, classroom behavior, and establishment of identity are discussed, with illustrations from classroom interaction and conversations. It is concluded that the child came to inhabit a flawed identity in the classroom, and that she makes sense of her situation in terms of that identity. When she lost the support of her community, needing to speak on her own in a circle or to children who are not friendly to her, or needs to perform individually in front of the teacher, she appeared mentally disorganized and linguistically incoherent. Her efforts to avoid being caught not knowing something may distract her from using community cues she is ordinarily adept at using in other situations. Implications for classroom practice are discussed. Contains six references. (MSE)

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# Learning ESL: participation in situated communities of practice

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## Introduction, Theory and Methodology

This is a report from data collected during a three year ethnographic classroom study, other parts of which have been published in the Canadian Modern Language Review in 1996 and in a 1998 article in TESOL Quarterly. In 1994, I selected six subjects from a kindergarten class located in a school in a suburb of one of Canada's largest cities. The area of the suburb in which the school is located is listed as working class on socio-economic maps, and in almost all classes in the school about 50% of the students are from language backgrounds other than English. From a class of 19 kindergarten students I selected: a boy and a girl with Chinese language background, a boy and a girl from Polish background and a boy and a girl from Punjabi language background. I followed these children, or rather, after attrition in grade one, 4 of them, to the end of grade 2. I observed in each of the three classrooms in which they were enrolled, taking field notes during my once a week visits, audio taping children and having an experienced video technician videotape the children once a month. Video recordings were transcribed in part, and are being used as for triangulation with fieldnotes and audio recordings. The analysis of the data collected is ongoing, and a research associate, Elaine Day and I are currently observing another cohort of children who are now in grade one. As well as the classroom data, we engaged (and are engaging) in research activities which involve the children's parents and teachers.

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The theoretical background which has informed these studies is variously termed sociocultural, socio-historical, cultural-historical. As Gutierrez and Stone (1997) succinctly put it:

> A cultural-historical theory of learning emphasizes the importance of understanding the individual as part of a social and historical context--in other words, the community (Cole, 1991; 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). (Gutierrez & Stone, 1997)

Lave & Wenger (1991) offer the notion of "community of practice", as a "set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice (p. 98). For them, communities include not only persons, but also their activities or practices, and the resources they use, in dynamic relation with one another. With participation in activity as the focus, Lave and Wenger see learning as a process whereby newcomers participate in "attenuated ways" with oldtimers in the performance of community practices. Gutierrez and Stone (1997) recently describe the increasing participation of a boy defined as learning disabled in particular classroom discursive practices, such that he "appropriates literacy knowledge" by which they mean "sociocultural, linguistic and content knowledge needed for successful participation and membership in this community" (p. 125)].

I have recently analyzed classrooms in terms of this notion of community of practice. It has appeared to me that classrooms potentially contain several communities of practice, the official one being composed of the teacher and the children, the activities in which they customarily (and extraordinarily) engage together, and the material, linguistic and other intellectual resources with

which they mediate their activities. I have become impressed by the extent to which interactions among these three lead to complexity in the system. It has appeared to me that sometimes "successful" participation means the development of a "more powerful" identity and increased participation in community activities and more access to community resources. However, it has also become apparent to me that classroom communities, at least those in which I have spent my time, are sites where having a "damaged" identity is a real possibility and where fuller participation in community practices might mean collaboration in organizing a search for and identification of flawed performance in activities. Fuller participation may be <u>not</u> resisting one's identity as flawed. Another way of looking at this might be to say that successful learning for some might well be a matter of learning how to participate <u>less</u>, rather than more fully, in some community practices. As well, learning in communities may mean <u>reduced</u> rather than increased access to community resources. While some recent educational literature has tended to see creation and strengthening of classroom community as an unproblematic goal, I am seeing in the sites in which I work that some of the specific characteristics of available identities, practices and resources there provide differential trajectories of learning for different categories of participants. In this presentation, I examine a story of one school year in the life of one of the children we have followed, and examine how it is that "learning ESL" sometimes entails the development of a damaged identity and <u>limiting</u> one's participation in classroom practices and one's access to classroom resources.

**Surjeet**

Surjeet was the female Punjabi language background student selected at the beginning of fieldwork. Upon her entry to kindergarten, Surjeet was defined by

the school as "ESL", and she attended the afternoon kindergarten "Language Development" class, as well as the morning "regular" class. However, interviews with her family which I conducted with help from bilingual research assistants made it clear that while Surjeet seemed able to repond appropriately at least some of the time to commands given in Punjabi, and could respond (in English) appropriately to questions asked of her in Punjabi, she actually spoke very little Punjabi with anyone in her co-resident extended family and the adults in her family defined her solely as a speaker of English. Despite the school's non-problematic definition of her as an ESL student, her identity in this regard, with respect to her family, was thus somewhat contradictory.

Surjeet's teacher, Mrs. Clark, stated in my first interview with her in October that she thought Surjeet was "really shy and withdrawn" and that she played by herself most of the time. She mentioned the fact that Surjeet had been in no pre-school program and that she had had a difficult time separating from her mother in the first week of school. She wondered if Surjeet had a "learning problem", but was unsure:

> When I consider where she was--she couldn't even recognize her name in the beginning and now she's writing it without a model, she's coming, and yet in other respects she's so low, like in counting one to ten, she really doesn't get it. So we'll have to see. (I10.94.6)

Mrs. Clark's uncertainty about Surjeet's abilities persisted throughout the year, but she ceased to worry about Surjeet's isolation, as she observed Surjeet in frequent conversation with Donna, an anglophone girl and with other children as well.

The practices of the kindergarten classroom in which Surjeet was enrolled are similar to those of other kindergartens. Children participated in "circle times", large group sessions in which (among other activities) they were led by the teacher in choral repetition of series (days of the week, months of the year, counting, and so on), songs, rhymes and so on. The explicit literacy-preparatory activities in which they engaged, reading the "morning message", for example, were also initially accomplished chorally. The teacher might also read the children a story during this circle time. After the large group activity, the children engaged in completion of craft activities at tables and then had an "activity time" in which they played in small groups of their own choosing with the play materials of the classroom, also of their own choosing. In many of these activities, children's individual verbal participation was not particularly salient. Tasks were accomplished, conversations were completed, songs were sung, sometimes books were read and so on, without explicit identification of the performances of the individual children. While two of the subject children I was observing were initially almost entirely silent in their kindergarten, their non-engagement did not appear to be community knowledge which was either noticed or sufficiently interesting for comment by the other children.

While Surjeet was at the beginning of the year, relatively non-active verbally in large group choral work, she was often physically "in tune" with what was going on-- moving her body in consonance with the rhythms set up. As well, she engaged in conversations with other children with little apparent difficulty. This example recorded in November makes explicit the kind of free-wheeling, relatively non-

cohesive discourse which often accompanied children's completion of crafts:

*While completing their craft, Earl and Melanie talking about the Christmas trees they are going to get.*

Surjeet: Me too/ I have Christmas tree/ / I have Christmas toys and Christmas/

Earl: I don't know how to write fluffy/ /

Surjeet: *(Singing)* Fluffy/ fluffy/ / Oh/ oh/ you have to write your name/ / *(To Martin)*

Martin: But I write my name/ /

Surjeet: You need to write it on your pencil./ / *(Singing)* Everyday I like/

Earl: What are you singing/ /

Surjeet: I not telling/ / *(Singing)* La/ blah/ tah la blah tah/ / I have a song/ I have it/ really I have it,/ / But I don't need/

In the following conversation with Melanie at the water table, the girls' contributions are more closely tied to one another:

*Surjeet and Melanie are at water table., filling containers with water.*

Surjeet: This is a flower thing/ /

Melanie: This is soap/ /

Melanie: Thank you/ Surjeet/ / How do you make bubbles?/ /

Surjeet: You press it hard/ /

Melanie: Put some more in here/ Surjeet/ / That's enough/ / You water the garden while I get some nice good stuff/ /

Surjeet: More?/ /

Melanie: A little more in there/ /

Surjeet: A little more/ / *(offers water)*

Melanie: No/ /

Surjeet: You're not playing?/ /

Melanie: Yes/ /

Surjeet: *(She notices her sleeves are wet). Laughs)* Oh-oh/ /My mom will hit me/ / *(Girls decide to stop and dry their hands.)*

As well as frequently participating in conversations like these with other children, Surjeet appeared often quite competent in literacy-related activities. In October, I observed Surjeet playing a Concentration game with alphabet letters on cards. Surjeet handily won the game playing with two other children. She then continued to play with other children, winning each time. In February, she delivered all her own Valentine cards, matching the names on the envelopes of her cards to the outside of the "mailboxes" created by the individual children, and she interrupted her deliveries several times by pointing out to other children mailboxes for which they were looking. Her assistance looked very efficient and accurate. In March, Surjeet remarked to Mrs. Clark, as she examined a chart with children's names on it: "Abe's got a small name!" She also approached Mrs. Clark on another occasion in March, pointing to the label on Mrs. Clark's desk: "I can read this! 'Mrs. Clark's desk'!" Her numeracy abilities also appeared to develop over the course of the year. While as Mrs. Clark noted, Surjeet did not participate in the choral chanting of numbers in the circle at the beginning of the year, in videotapes taken in May, it is evident that she sometimes led the group in choral counting. In addition, her paintings were interesting and colourful. However, her expertise in these activities did not seem part of "what everybody knew" about her in her classroom.

"What everybody knew" about Surjeet seemed to become rather less associated with her expertise. In terms of teacher-led activities, as the year wore on, (again, as is considered appropriate for kindergarten) choral activities in the circle diminished somewhat, and children were increasingly encouraged to make "solo" performances. Children were asked to read the morning message on their own; to contribute information with less teacher-scaffolding in their sharing time turns. In these situations, Surjeet very rarely offered to contribute, and if she was asked to do so, she often declined bids to answer, displaying somewhat stereotypical physical displays of "shyness". For report cards, children were individually quizzed by the teacher with reference to their knowledge of community information: days of the week, colours, alphabet letters and so on. Mrs. Clark defined Surjeet's performance in these individual activities as delayed, but she continued to be puzzled by the unevenness of Surjeet's "delay".

With regard to activities with other children, Surjeet's performance also became, I believe, assessed as inadequate or flawed. Consider this conversation in February, while Surjeet was gluing pieces of paper to two toilet paper rolls:

Nina: What are you making/ /

Surjeet: A phone/ / *(She looks up at Nina)*

Nina: What kind of phone/ What kind of phone/ /

*Pause (5 seconds)*

Surjeet: It's not a phone/ /

Nina: Then why do you need that red paper/ /

Surjeet: *(She glances at red paper)* It's not, it's a pur/ *(eyes widen)* I don't need it/ I only need /dIs/ //*(gestures to white paper beside her)*

Nina: Then why did you get that red paper//

Surjeet: I didn't do it// Randy got it//

Nina: I don't believe you//

Surjeet: I saw _(incomprehensible words)_____

Nina: I didn't even just see Randy on this table//

Surjeet: I sitted here//*(eyes widen and she gestures to chair beside her)*

Nina: Well, he's on that table//

Surjeet: (incomprehensible)

Nina: I know everything//

Surjeet: No you don't.//

N: Yes I do//

Surjeet: No you don't//

Nina:*(singing)* I know everything/ I know everything//

*Julie approaches and says to Surjeet*: What are you making//

Nina: Julie/ Julie/ what did the cat do?//

Julie: I don't know/ I don't know// *She walks away. Nina also leaves.*

In this conversation, Nina badgers Surjeet about the red paper, telling Surjeet she is not believed. Surjeet asserts initially she is making a phone and then contradicts that assertion. The interaction ends with Nina telling Surjeet that she (Nina) "knows everything" and she usurps Surjeet's turn in the conversation after Julie asks Surjeet a question. It appears to me that this attempt to position Surjeet as <u>not</u> knowing

everything (which Surjeet resists mildly), as not believed and as not allowed a conversational place became relatively common in this classroom. What looks like Surjeet's sometimes non-cohesive conversational contributions seem part of this process--she cannot find a place for herself easily within conversations, and what she does say is not credited as logical or truthful.

An incident near the end of the year which occurred in the library provided for me a metaphor for thinking about Surjeet in her classroom. On this occasion, Surjeet was sitting on a chair at a table in the library and Julie came up to her saying "I have to sit somewhere" and bent her knees and put her hips down on the side of the chair on which Surjeet was sitting, forcing Surjeet out. Surjeet did not protest this, and went and sat on another chair in the library. Earlier in the year, I saw similar incidents. There were several occasions on which children took materials which Surjeet was using out of her hands as well, or when they indicated she had materials they wanted, she gave them up. In addition, there are numerous incidents in my field notes when Surjeet stood at the entrance to the "housekeeping" centre, a centre she appeared to really like, and stay outside, watching other children play. These incidents reinforced my impression that Surjeet was learning that her place in this community might not be secure, central, active, or desirable.

At the end of the year, Mrs. Clark believed that Surjeet was still quite handicapped by incomplete knowledge of English and she recommended to the next year's teacher that Surjeet get extra instruction in ESL. Mrs. Clark was also concerned that she might have a "Learning Disability" and that she should be tested in her grade one class for possible remedial placement.

## Conclusion

McDermott (1993) urges attention to how "settings organize the search for and location of differential performances", maintaining that when "degradation" is possible for flawed performances, learners will focus their attention on avoiding degradation, on not-getting-caught not-knowing, and other participants will be preoccupied with catching individuals at not knowing. When attention is directed in this way, possibilities for participation in the original activity become correspondingly limited.

I believe that for several reasons, Surjeet comes to inhabit a flawed identity in her classroom, and that sense is made of "what she does" in terms of that identity. In discussing the rise of compulsory schools in 17th and 18th ccentury Europe, Foucault reminds us that identification of deviance (or "normalization") was one of their primary functions. As summarized by Ryan (1989):

> Normalizing judgement operated to ensure the adoption of particular standards. Subjects were compared, differentiated and ranked according to where they stood in relation to the "good" and the "bad". Rewards and punishments were assigned to individuals on the basis of their nature, potential, level and value to exert a pressure to conform to a standard model which science was instrumental in establishing.

Kindergarten is a pivotal time in the lives of many children and families. While children's development is officially normed in North America by physicians and other health care providers from birth on (and unofficially normed by parents and others as well), kindergarten marks a substantial

shift in how children's behaviour, growth and development are gauged, assessed and compared with others. Kindergarten teachers are explicitly charged with the identification of outlier children, those whose development in any particular area is seen as"delayed".

How do kindergarten practices organize the search for differential performances? Some kindergarten practices are obviously not organized to make identification of differential performances easy: choral repetition and small group conversations are situations in which children have the opportunity to use the community knowledge and skills as resources in organizing their performances. When engaged in these kinds of activities, the children appear as good as they need to be to get the job done. However, there are other situations in kindergartens (and, as our further ethnographic investigations have shown us, increasingly in higher grades) which do make differential performance obvious and consequential. When Surjeet loses the support of her community, when she needs to speak on her own in the circle, or speak to children who are not friendly toward her, or to perform individually in front of the teacher, she appears mentally disorganized and linguistically incoherent. Her efforts to avoid getting caught not knowing may distract her from using the community cues she appears so adept at using in other situations. For her, what her community of practice might teach her is to be more silent, to venture opinions less often, to limit her attempts to appropriate the linguistic as well as other resources of her community.

I said earlier hat I am concerned about the seemingly uncritical celebration of classrooms as communities found in some recent educational literature. In the situation I have just described, classroom practices in a

kindergarten might be seen to start a process of identification of deviance for children and to be congruent with other more "macro" processes of differentiating citizens from one another. Finding a believed, respected and powerful place from which to speak is problematic for Surjeet, as it is for other minority language background adults in North America. Examining how the practices of what is usually seen as a benign milieu, a kindergarten, and seeing how they resonate with other larger societal practices may encourage us to mount more comprehensive critiques of both those levels, and not concentrate our efforts on helping children like Surjeet learn to "fit in".

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